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The Coming Of Nikalank Avatar :

A Messianic Theme In Some Sectarian Traditions Of North Western India

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By Dominique-Sila Khan

INDEX

- [INTRODUCTION](#)
- [MESSIANISM IN INDIA](#)
- [THE PROPHETIC GINANS](#)
- [TWO DISTINCT VISIONS OF THE FUTURE](#)
- [ISMAILISM IN THE SUBCONTINENT](#)
- [THE KALKI PURANA](#)
- [THE AGAM VANIS](#)
- [MESSIANISM AND SIKHS](#)

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INDEX

- [INTRODUCTION](#)
- [MESSIANISM IN INDIA](#)
- [THE PROPHETIC GINANS](#)
- [TWO DISTINCT VISIONS OF THE FUTURE](#)
- [ISMAILISM IN THE SUBCONTINENT](#)
- [THE KALKI PURANA](#)
- [THE AGAM VANIS](#)
- [MESSIANISM AND SIKHS](#)

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For page numbers, see the page footer. Page numbers are in 'Page x of y' format
For Reference See Pages: 22.

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THE COMING OF NIKALANK AVATAR: A MESSIANIC THEME IN SOME SECTARIAN TRADITIONS OF NORTH-WESTERN INDIA

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Dominique-Sila Khan

In the literary tradition associated with a few "obscure" religious movements of Rajasthan and Gujarat [1] one finds a number of prophetic songs the central motifs of which are of an eschatological and messianic nature. They describe the end of the world or rather, according to Hindu beliefs, the cataclysms and disasters preceding the dissolution (pralaya) of the universe at the end of the fourth cosmic Age (Kali yuga) before a new Era begins. [2] The advent of a saviour and restorer of justice in the form of Vishnu's tenth incarnation is also predicted, although, unlike the Epic and Puranic Kalki, he is referred to as Nikalank Avatar.

Some of these devotional compositions known as Agam vanis (litt. "poems of the time to come") [3] are still sung during the sacred vigils (jama-jagrans) organized by the followers of a sect called Mahapanth or Nizarpanth, who accept as one of their gurus Ramdev Pir, a fourteenth- fifteenth century saint of Marwar (D.S. Khan, 1993, 1996). The numerous modern devotees who also worship him as a folk-deity but do not belong to the panth are not familiar with these songs which are a part of the religious heritage of some other sects as well: the Bisnoi, Jasnathi and Ai panths. The founders of these movements which are mostly spread in Rajasthan but also found in neighbouring areas, such as Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Punjab, are believed to have flourished in the fifteenth century. Most of their teachings have remained secret to this day, although the devotional poems ascribed to them and to their disciples may superficially display similarities with the compositions of better known Medieval saints of North India (D.S. Khan, 1997). The same type of vanis are also found in other traditions such as the Ravi-Ban sampraday and the Pranami sect (Gohil, 1994: 20). [4]

Remarking that this prophetic theme plays a major role in the Nizarpanthi tradition, most followers of which seem to belong to untouchables groups (Gohil, Ibid.: 52-3) asserts that the theme is a part of an esoteric revelation connected with the sect. He also attempts to show that the messianic accents of the Agam vanis reflect the condition of the depressed communities of North India and their expectations of a brighter future. According to the same author, the poets and prophets of the panth have been inspired by an old pan-Hindu

tradition which they have revived and brought into prominence. The roots of their messianism would thus lie in the Epic and Puranic literature where mention is made of the advent of Kalki, the tenth avatar of Vishnu.

In the following pages I will attempt to demonstrate that this viewpoint does not account for the presence of many prominent themes in the Agam vanis and leaves a series of questions unanswered. It may indeed be tempting to think that the down-trodden have, at some time in their still unwritten history, resorted to a traditional messianic motif which they would have adapted to their requirements and preserved to this day since, despite modern law, society has not been able to do them full justice. Prohibited by the Indian constitution (article 17), untouchability is still a reality in contemporary India. However, the idea of an exclusive link between this type of messianic expectations and the social helplessness of the lower Hindu castes is contradicted by one fact: the presence of the same motif, expressed in similar terms, in the Bisnoi, Jasnathi and Aipanthei sectarian traditions in which agricultural "clean" communities (Jats, Sirvis) enjoying a much higher status are the major bulk of followers.

Moreover, the Nizarpanth shares with the above mentioned movements a number of other devotional compositions, rituals and organizational features which are not found in other better known Medieval sampradays. This may lead us to contemplate the existence of some historical link between them -a link which some of my Nizarpanthei informants were ready to acknowledge when they stated that "originally there was only one sect, the Bisnoi and Ai panths are but offshoots of our sectarian tradition".

Another trait which they share (although modern followers are rather reluctant to admit it in the present context of "communal" conflicts) is the presence of Muslim elements in their sacred literature and ceremonies. This phenomenon, encountered at various levels in the religious life of the Subcontinent, has invariably been explained by repeated interactions with Sufism (interpreted as Sunni mysticism) or so called "popular Islam" -which in some cases would have even resulted in a kind of syncretism. As far as the Ramdev movement is concerned, Muslim influences have been noted but admittedly remained of obscure origin (Binford, 1976: 126).

Reexamining the problem and drawing attention to the forgotten work of some nineteenth century Gujarati authors such as Nanjiani, others (D.S. Khan, Moir, Mumtaz Ali) have recently suggested an altogether different view. The Islamic components of the traditions studied here have not been drawn from Sunni Islam, whether in its more "legalistic" or mystical, Sufic forms, but have a Shia background. According to this hypothesis, these sects which appeared in Medieval India could have been offshoots or "lost branches" of Nizari Ismailism -a religious movement the role of which in the Subcontinent has been greatly underestimated and remained unexplored to this day. It is only recently that a few authors (Allana, Kassam, D.S. Khan, Mumtaz Ali) have alluded to the fact that the Ismaili mission (dawa) may have had in the past a much greater extension than can be surmised from the number of communities which subsist in India and Pakistan.

At this stage it may be necessary to say a few words about the particular form which Ismailism assumed in this part of the world and the nature of its interaction with various local communities before turning our attention to the

messianic theme which is the subject of this article.

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[Table of Contents](#) | [Next >>](#)

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ISMAILISM IN THE SUBCONTINENT: "AN INNOVATIVE SYNTHESIS"

Without entering into details, for which we refer the readers to various specialized publications, [5] let us recall here that this form of Shiism which has been described as "a highly organized movement of the revolutionary type" (Daftary, 1990: 91-141) backed by a complex esoteric philosophy (Corbin, 1986: 115-54) has a long and checkered history. In the Subcontinent it had penetrated as early as the end of the eighth century (MacLean, 1989: 126--153), first spreading in Sindh in its pre-Fatimid and Fatimid forms.

Following one major split in 1094 Ismailism was divided into two main branches, the Mustalian one (represented in South Asia by the Bohra community) and the Nizari one, which has its first center at Alamut in the Daylam region of Iran. Besides Syria and Central Asia the "new mission" - as it was referred to - established itself in the Subcontinent where the present followers who recognize the Aga Khan as their leader and Imam are known by various names such as Khojas and Shamsis (Hollister, 1979: 396) and concentrated in Sindh, Punjab, Gujarat and the region of Bombay. These communities form a minority. It has been generally surmised that there had been very few converts to Nizari Ismailism and that the present followers of the Aga Khan were their sole descendants.

However, during the last decades of the nineteenth century a Gujarati author who was an ex-Ismaili converted to Twelver Shiism (Nanjiani, 1892) made an intriguing discovery. He came across certain groups which claimed a Hindu identity but appeared to have been strongly influenced by Ismaili ideas and practices. Most of them were untouchable worshippers of a deified saint called Ramdev Pir, although the tradition insisted that the allegedly "Hindu Pir" [6] had also made disciples among Rajputs, Jain Oswals and others (Nanjiani, 1918: 137). Their sect, which was extremely secretive by nature, was alluded to by many names, among which the appellation Nizar Panth was certainly the most surprising for the Gujarati assistant revenue commissioner. As Nanjiani requested them to explain the meaning of the word nizar, the followers could but repeat that "Nizar was God" (Nanjiani, 1918: 14). Nevertheless the author of Khoja vrttant started to suspect that there could be some connection with Nizari Ismailism and its eponymic founder Imam Nizar.

How was the phenomenon to be accounted for? Nanjiani (Ibid.: 117-9) formulated the hypothesis that these groups had earlier been approached by the Nizari preachers of Alamut or their successors and submitted to a process of conversion. The possibility of mere borrowings and exchanges of ideas between the two communities (Ismailis and "Hindu" Nizarpanthis) was ruled out for one simple reason: the Nizari teachings were extremely secretive and

never divulged to the non-initiated, referred to as *nugras* (litt. those who have no guru). Later on, according to the same author, these converted groups would have severed their links with the Ismaili centre (located in Iran where the Imam resided and represented in South Asia by the main Pirs of Uch-Multan) and gradually come back to the fold of Hinduism. This was also my hypothesis (D.S. Khan, 1996, 1997) and that of a modern Pakistani author, Mumtaz Ali (1994).

Subsisting in the form of isolated pockets of followers (Nanji, 1978: 68) mostly resorting to *taqiyya* (a Shia custom consisting of concealing one's true faith for fear of persecution at the hands of Sunni rulers), these communities had retained a number of their original practices and beliefs even after conversion. At a time when the Nizari *dawa* was weakened (this could have happened during the fifteenth century or later) they would have gradually drifted away from the center of the mission, losing contact with the Imam and the Pirs while their own leaders started to act as "independent dynasties of Pirs" (Daftary, 1990: 468). The various crises experienced by the Ismaili *dawa*, in particular during the fifteenth century when a major dissident branch of Nizarism, the Imamshahi sect of Pirana, emerged in Gujarat (Ivanow, 1933), may have resulted in multiple splits which have not necessarily left traces in the written history of Ismailism. [7] The various groups which had been once converted to the Nizari faith and become independent were more and more attracted into the orbit of other religious movements. Eventually the need for clear-cut religious identities which emerged in the nineteenth century (Masselos, 1978; D.S. Khan, 1997) prompted the followers of these various groups to identify themselves with Hindus, Sunni or Twelver Shia Muslims, if they did not choose to rally round the Nizari Imam himself.

It is understandable that, owing to a greater doctrinal rigidity, the communities which merged into the Sunni or Twelver Shia forms of Islam should have been forced to relinquish most of their former beliefs and practices, whereas the groups who identified themselves with various forms of Hinduism (Hinduism being essentially a fluid, polythetic concept) could retain a number of elements which testified to their former adhesion to Ismailism. The process was made easier by two factors: the secrecy which surrounded the sectarian traditions of the Nizarpanthi, Bisnoi and Jasnathi followers and the particular form assumed by the Nizari tradition itself in the Subcontinent. MacLean (1989: 151-2) has rightly stated that "a number of Isma'ili doctrines or rituals - some of which admittedly would be readily cognizable within a Hindu context - were adhered to not in conflict with, but in addition to the original structure of belief or ritual". Actually the fact that the form of Ismailism which survived in the Subcontinent "was the type embedded within a Hindu context" (Ibid.: 152) - a phenomenon which can be referred to as acculturation - is of exceptional importance. As explained by the same author (Ibid.), "The results of this embedment was not a simple absorption of the Ismaili remnants into Hinduism, but the creation of an innovation synthesis. Adhesion led eventually to syncretism, combining themes and technical vocabulary from both Hinduism and Isma'ilism to form a new and unified religious system". Kassam (1994 and 1995: 71) has analyzed this dynamic process, its causes and consequences in still greater detail.

However, Nanjiani (1918: 14) had interpreted the preponderance of Hindu elements in the literature of the once Ismailized communities he had discovered

and who followed the Nizar Panth (the very name of the sect practically betraying its origin) as the result of an "incomplete conversion", that is to say of a process which had been started but could never be completed by the Nizari preachers. The allegedly smaller number of Hingu motifs interspersed with the Islamic ones in the sacred literature of the Nizari Khojas referred to as ginans (Shackle and Moir, 1992: 14-28) could thus be pointed out to prove that the tradition of the AgaKhani Khojas was, instead, an authentically Muslim one though it had adopted certain references to Hindu mythologies, terminologies and rituals. But this view would reflect a faulty understanding of the historical process at work. The stronger Muslim "flavour" of the ginanic literature was not the consequence of a successfully completed conversion programme but was due to the gradual reIslamization of the Khoja heritage which had begun after the 1866 Aga Khan case of Bombay (Shackle and Moir, 1992: 112-3) and had continued up to our times. This reevaluation of the religious identity of the followers of the Nizari Imam (Nanji, 1988) led more and more to the elimination of certain conspicuous Hindu themes and terminologies. For instance, the motif of the Das avatar (the ten incarnations of Vishnu) and of the tenth manifestation which was the main object of prayer of the Khojas was abandoned.

As I have attempted to show, this process was paralleled by a tentative reHinduization of former Nizari groups at present known as Nizarpanthis, Bisnois, Jasnathis and Aipanthis (D.S. Khan, 1997). Muslim terms and concepts were either eliminated or reinterpreted. Despite all this, the devotional literature of these religious movements has retained a number of "syncretic" aspects, as is also the case of the Ismaili hymns. Discovering the ginans a reader who would be familiar with the Hindu or Sufi religious poems of Medieval India, but not with Indian Ismailism, would certainly share the surprise experienced by F. Mallison when for the first time she came across the devotional compositions of the Khojas: "I had the revelation of a religious tradition very much akin to the non-sectarian Vaishnavism of the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries in Gujarat ..." (Mallison, 1991: 93). In the selection of translated ginans presented by Shackle and Moir (1992) and Kassam (1996) one cannot but be impressed by this fact: the Ismaili message, albeit Islamic in its origin and spirit, is mainly conveyed through a number of indigenous (Hindu/Jain) concepts and myths recast into a different mould which bears the unique imprint of Indian Nizarism. I have referred to these motifs in which Kassam (1994: 232) rightly sees "techniques of transformation" as "Hindu Ismailized patterns" (D.S. Khan, 1997). There is a reason to believe that these patterns were aimed at producing conversions while simultaneously serving the purpose of taqiyya. The identification of these specific patterns is therefore essential to determine the part played by Ismailism in a tradition which no longer identifies themselves with this religious movement.

Contemplating the possibility of a former link between the Medieval sects which form the object of this study and Ismailism and considering the fact that they had retained throughout original elements of their culture from the pre-conversion period, elements which were later highlighted during the process of reHinduization, one can now raise the following question to the elucidation of which this article is devoted: has the messianism of the Agam vanis directly originated from a preserved or reappropriated Hindu heritage or is it in some way connected with a former Nizari affiliation? Before proceeding to a comparative analysis which alone will help us to come to a definite conclusion,

it might not be out of place to say a few words about Messianic and eschatological traditions found in the Subcontinent.

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[<< Previous](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [Next >>](#)

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MESSIANISM IN INDIA: ESCHATOLOGIES, REVOLUTIONS AND SAVIOURS

This issue of an Indian - non Muslim - messianism has been raised by Fuchs in his study of Messianic movements in India (1992). As that author has it, eschatological expectations, that is to say the hope for a universal renewal through world catastrophes, revolutions and upheavals, are generated by a clash between two types of culture, "one rather undeveloped and retarded, the other at least technically vastly superior" (Ibid.: 2) giving birth to a feeling of unrest and insecurity. This phenomenon, as argued by Fuchs, is generally associated with the appearance of a charismatic leader, often a "Godman" who, resorting to violence and rebellion, seeks to restore a Golden Age. The same author has found that this type of events has been particularly frequent in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries among tribals and untouchables, although they have also existed among higher caste Hindus and among Sikhs. However, the examples selected by Fuchs to illustrate his theory connect these movements with the colonial period during which such a clash of cultures is likely to have occurred at various levels. In fact the author deals mainly with socio-religious upheavals based on a messianic ideology which is not drawn from older beliefs mirrored in the legends or literature of a particular community, but proposed as a new revelation by some charismatic leader. In other words, Fuchs' messianic movements do not appear as the fulfillment of long nurtured expectations but are generated at the very time of the emergence of a "rebellious prophet". A notable exception represented by two Sikh prophetic movements will be examined further as it has a direct bearing on our subject.

In contradistinction to the type of messianic movements analyzed by Fuchs, the object of this study is a tradition transmitted through oral or written poems reflecting eschatological and messianic trends associated with a particular sect but which did not lead to any political upheaval. It consists in the passive expectation of a messiah at the end of the present Hindu Era of Kali Yuga and, therefore, continues to function as a prophecy. In this respect the theme is more akin to the Epic/Puranic traditions connected with Kalki than to the revolutionary movements described by Fuchs.

On the other hand messianism, as is well known, is a component of the Judeo-Christian and Iranian religious heritages which have in turn influenced some Muslims thinkers. As far as Islam is concerned it has been shown that the figure of the madhi (guide and restorer of justice) (Encyclopaedia of Islam 1986, V: 1230-8 and 1978, IV: 456-7) has been connected with extremist and revolutionary trends (Marquet, 1985: 8-25), as well as with Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam. Actually the expectation of this messiah, albeit theoretically shared by all Muslims, became one of the major beliefs of the

Shias, whereas it has never been adopted as a central dogma of the Sunni faith. According to Vatikiotis (1981: 109-116), "The Qur'an is free of messianic expectations (. . .) Messianism, as a basic rationalisation of unfulfilled prophecies and a consolation for dissatisfied Muslims, became the rudimentary appeal of the Fatimid (Ismaili) Message and teaching (da'wa)" (. . .) In the Qur'an, however, there is no reference to mahdi. It is rather in later collections of traditions where the concept is given theoretical and historical concretisation". Corbin (1986: 136) refers to the "eschatological ethos" which together with the basic theory of Imamology " dominates the whole Shia consciousness." Sharing this ethos with other trends of Shiism Ismailism has developed the figure of the Qaim (litt. "the riser") identified with the Paraclet announced in Saint John's Gospel (Ibid.: 139). In Shiism the expected madhi came to be referred to as al-qaim in so far as he was supposed to appear during the qiyamat (Resurrection) - at a time when the mahdi would "rise" to rule over the world as a dispenser of justice. According to the philosophy of the Twelver Shias, after his final occultation (gayba) the twelfth Imam, identified with the mahdi, will reappear only at the end of times, whereas the Qaim plays a more complex role in Ismaili philosophy. Many offshoots of Shiism and Ismailism were actually centered around the recognition or rejection of a given Imam or religious leader as the expected mahdi; from the Hanafya movement (Kaysanite sect) to the Qarmatians and the Druzes, many examples can be given to illustrate this phenomenon and the role it has played in the history of Islam (Marquet, 1985: 8-25). Even for the main branches of Ismailism the idea has a powerful attraction. The Fatimid kingdom was firmly established in Egypt by the Caliph Abdallah al Mahdi (910 A.D.) who, as his name indicated, proclaimed himself to be the Imam Qaim (Marquet, Ibid.: 11-12).

Another major event which happened later, during the Persian Nizari period is connected with the fourth master of Alamut: Hasan ala dhikirhi as-salam had declared that he was the expected Imam Qaim and that the time of Resurrection (Qiyamat) had arrived two years after his ascent on the throne, in 1164 (Marquet, Ibid.: 20-22). His successor, however, had to abolish the qiyamat, since history had not been brought to an end. In order to explain the succession of Imams after the proclaimed Resurrection and their return to clandestinity a new interpretation was given to the concepts of mahdi-qaim and of qiyamat. One of the main characteristics of the Ismaili doctrine will then revolve around a prophecy which "is rythmed by astrological cycles determining on earth the historical cycles. .the long life of the Universe consisting thus in cycles of seven thousand years" (Marquet, Ibid.: 23). The ideas of the series of seven Imams and of the alternation of clandestinity and manifestation became central. The qiyamat was not to be understood as a unique event but as a repeated, cyclic phenomenon corresponding to a period of manifestation. As Daftary has explained (1990: 565), the concept of Resurrection does not only refer to the last judgment but "also came to be used in reference to the end of a partial cycle in the history of mankind, with the implication that the entire hierohistory of mankind consisted of many such partial cycles and partial qiyamas, leading to the final qiyama, sometimes called qiyama al-qiyamat. The Nizaris of the Alamut period interpreted the qiyama spiritually as the manifestation of the unveiled truth in the spiritual reality of the current Imam who was also called the Qaim al qiyama".

This last point is of great importance. One must bear in mind the fact that in the Subcontinent the incorporation of indigenous motifs and concepts into the

Nizari doctrine was not only the result of precautionary dissimulation (taqiyya) or of a particular strategy of conversion: it fitted into the Ismaili conception of a meta- or hierohistory. In the Islamic context Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus had been accepted as prophets of previous times, Muhammad being the last, the "seal of the prophets". According to the Ismaili philosophy, there had been and would always be prophets, each accompanied by an Imam -Ali being the first Imam of our cycle (Marquet, Ibid.: 23; Daftary, Ibid.: 393-4). Preaching among Hindus the Nizari Pirs did not hesitate to include in the list figures of the Epic and Puranic lore which were familiar to the converted people. The similarity which already existed between the indigenous concept of cyclic time (the yugas and kalpas) and avatars and the Ismaili cycles and manifestations and epiphany of the Divine (mazhar) could serve as a conceptual link bridging both traditions. Through a series of analogies and parallelisms the Hindu/Jain neophytes could thus be led to adhere to the new religion viewed, not as the negation, but as the fulfillment of their own religious beliefs. The Arabic sirat-e-mustaqim and din al-haqq referring to Nizari Ismailism became something like an Indian sect also called "the true path" or Satpanth.

[<< Previous](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [Next >>](#)

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THE KALKI PURANA

We can now start our comparative analysis with the figure of Kalki as presented in the Epic and Puranic literature. As far as we know, the tenth avatar of Vishnu has not inspired any Hindu messianic movement of the revolutionary type nor does he seem to have played any significant role in the Medieval devotional movements (bhakti) centered mostly on Krishna or Rama, the most popular incarnations. If references to Kalki are found in the Epics as well as in a few Puranas such as the Bhagavata and the Visnu Puranas (Stutley, 1985: 138) the two major texts are undoubtedly the Bhavisya and Kalki Puranas. For this study the latter is certainly the more relevant as it deals in detail with the descent of the tenth incarnation, his life on earth, the various battles fought by him, his marriage and his final return to the Vaishnava paradise (vaikunth) via the Himalayas. The Bhavisya Purana, instead, describes future events preceding the coming of Kalki of whom comparatively little is said. [8]

I will therefore focus on the Kalki Purana, quoting only occasionally from other Puranic or Epic texts, and present its main themes which will then be compared to both the Agam vanis and to the prophetic hymns of the Ismaili tradition. Contrary to the Bhavisya Purana, which traditionally figures in the list of the eighteen great Puranas, the Kalki Purana is considered a secondary Purana (upapurana). It is also referred to as anubhagavata, being sometimes regarded as a sequel to the Bhagavata Purana belonging to the Vaishnava sectarian tradition (Norman, 1908). Nothing can be said for certain about its date of composition. The text may not be very old, but since it describes the triumph of the Brahmanical religion over Buddhism and Jainism viewed as heresies one can say at least that it reflects a period between the seventh and the twelfth centuries when these religious traditions were on the decline. [9]

The central character of the Kalki Purana is the tenth avatar of Vishnu mostly referred to as Kalki. The etymology of this name is by no means clear. According to Norman (Ibid.: 88), "the name Kalki is derived from Kalka and would mean 'the destroyer of what is foul'. The Marathi variant kalanki points to the same meaning. Some (...) derive the word from Kali and a root kai to destroy, but this is not authenticated". In his postface to the French translation of the Kalki Purana (Bhatt and Remy, 1983: 192) Preau stresses the ambiguity of the name: "The very name of Kalki or Kalki (both forms are found) is intriguing because kalka in Sanskrit means 'dirt', 'stain'. Actually the name of Kalki is perceived by Abegg as an antithesis, whereas, according to the Kalki Purana, Kalki would mean 'he who removes sin or blemish from the world', Kalki being sometimes referred to as kalkavinasana, 'the destroyer of blemish'".

In other texts Kalki is known by alternative names such as Parasraya in the Visnu Purana (Stutley, 1985: 138) and Visnuvyasa in the Mahabharata, the

Vayu Purna and the Harivamsa (Bhatt and Remy: 192). Curiously enough he is nowhere, as far as I know, referred to as Niskalank although this Sanskrit adjective meaning "immaculate" or "stainless" - otherwise used to designate the Absolute or formless God - would certainly suit him better than the obscure form Kalki. [\[10\]](#)

His story as told in the Kalki Purana can be summed up as follows. The future avatar of Vishnu, said to be the son of a Brahmin named Visnuvyasa, has received from the god Shiva a miraculous sword, a parrot and a winged horse of white colour whose name - given as Devadatta (litt. "given by the gods") in the Bhagavata Purana (Stutley, Ibid.) - is not indicated in this text. His fiercest enemy for whose destruction he will become incarnated is Kali or Kali Yuga, the personification of the last of the four yugas, symbolizing all its evils. But Kalki will also have to fight against human enemies, mainly represented by Buddhists and Jains. After his victory he will marry two Ksatriya princesses and his mission on earth being accomplished he will retire to the Himalayas where he will spend his days in meditation.

Norman (Ibid.: 88) views the Kalki Purana as "a strange jumble of featureless character, convention battles, allegorical ideas, and hymns in praise of Visnu, Siva and the Ganga. The hero has nothing but his divinity to distinguish him from the typical princes of a Kavya. His performance is nothing more than the Digvijaya of a Cakravartiraja". Indeed one of the most striking traits which should be mentioned is the highly allegorical nature of most characters including the evil spirit of Kali Yuga (other yugas also appear in an anthropomorphic, personified form): for instance he is said to be the son of Krodha (anger) and Himsa (violence) (Bhatt and Remy: 192). The description of the evils of Kali Yuga is more vivid although it is mainly reduced to a list of transgressions against the Brahmanical socio-cosmic order (dharma): confusions of castes, mixed marriages, wrong behaviour of women, ignorance of Brahmins, pride of the low castes or sudras, etc. The Age of Kali Yuga is clearly represented as the rule of adharma but one does not find any extensive description of cataclysms or disasters. The only allusion to the disorder of nature is perhaps the comment, "the storm clouds will strangely rumble" (Bhatt and Remy: 26). The final victory over Jains and Buddhist is obviously meant to demonstrate the superiority of the Brahmanical dharma and of the high varnas: Kalki is portrayed as the son of a Brahman who, becoming a king, weds two Ksatriya princesses.

The general atmosphere of the passages of the Ramayana (both Valmiki's and Tulsi Das' versions) dealing with this theme is similar insofar as they emphasize the triumph of the Vedic and Brahmanical order, as does the interesting fragment of the Bhagavata Purana (Chapter 8) describing the end of Kali Yuga. This text contains, however, a few accents which differ from the Kalki Purana and are therefore worth mentioning here. The advent of Kalki, the restorer of dharma and destroyer of mlecchas (a term referring to "barbarians" and heretics outside the pale of the Brahmanical order) which is rather briefly alluded to is preceded by a vivid description of the evils of Kali Yuga. Besides the usual transgression of dharma (disruption of the caste system, misbehaviour of men and women, etc.) a few abnormalities are described: there will be no more rainfall on the earth, the life of human beings will be very short and they will grow old at the age of twenty, while very young girls will give birth to children.

It may now be surmised that it is the strong emphasis on an "orthodox" socio-religious order characterizing the traditional Hindu eschatological ethos which has prevented it from becoming the source of Hindu messianic movements which were, instead, mainly concerned with an overthrow of established powers and hierarchies.

[<< Previous](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [Next >>](#)

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THE PROPHETIC GINANS

The literature of the Khojas comprises a number of hymns revolving around war-like and eschatological themes. Among these texts it seems that the ginans ascribed to Pir Sadruddin, the fifteenth century dai who was also referred to by the Hindu names of Sahadev and Harchand, are the foremost, [11] albeit a similar motif is developed in some ginans signed Pir Shams and Imam Shah. Three ginans attributed to Pir Sadruddin and two signed Pir Shams will be examined here. [12]

Let us first describe the main features of these prophetic songs. They deal with events which will take place on the day of Resurrection (qiyamat) which is said to coincide with the end of the Hindu Kali Yuga. The Lord (Shah, Saheb) who is the ever-living Imam, a manifestation of Ali, and in this case the mahdi or qaim of the Resurrection is referred to as Nikalank Avatar. As has been said earlier, this Sanskrit adjective occasionally found in the old literature as one of the numerous epithets qualifying the Absolute, came into particular prominence within the Medieval Nath tradition, according to which it referred to the non qualified (nirgun) God. On the other hand Ivanow remarks that the word nikalank is a faithful, literal translation of the Arabic masum (stainless, immaculate) which was one of the traditional attributes of the Imam (Ivanow, 1948: 58) also referred to in the ginanic literature as the dasmo badshah (the tenth Emperor) and identified with the tenth incarnation of Vishnu.

According to the ginans, Nikalank Avatar will come from the West (a reference to the first Nizari center in Iran, at Alamut, in the Daylam region). His main task will be to fight against the Danavas (a category of Hindu demons) and in particular against the fiercest one, Kalinga (Kalingo) who is said to be the personification of Kali Yuga and its evils. Shackle and Moir (Ibid.: 192) write that "The destruction of Kalingo by the Imam Mahdi is a major feature of the final Resurrection which brings the Kaliyuga to an end". Then the Lord will wed Visav Kunvari (Sanskrit visva kumari) litt. the Virgin Universe or the Virgin Earth, viewed as a symbol of the converted community. While the faithful (rikhisar, momin) [13] will rule for many centuries, the lord (swami raja) will write the account of all deeds and accordingly reward or punish all men and women.

It is obvious that a number of themes and terminologies have been drawn from Hindu mythology (whether from the Kalki Purana or from other texts such as the Bhagavata Purana) but, as was customary in the Nizari tradition of the Subcontinent, they were reworked into somewhat different patterns in order to be in conformity with the Ismaili ideology. Besides, indigenous terminologies were used parallel, with Islamic denominations. For instance Nikalank Avatar was also called the Mahdi and Qaim, Swami Raja (the Lord) Shah, Rikhisar (the faithful) Momins, etc. (Shackle and Moir: 20).

Contrary to the Kalki Purana, which is replete with conventional and allegorical features, some prophetic ginans give a vivid description of the end of Kali Yuga. The army of the Lord comprises Hindu mythological characters as well as Islamic figures. Among the former one finds heroes of the Mahabharata such as the five Pandavas, Kunti and Draupadi, and other famous mythological characters such as the king Hariscandra or the demon-devotee Prahlad. In a ginan ascribed to Sadruddin one reads (Shackle and Moir: 117): "The Sayyids of India will attack and the five Pandavas will join them". Among those who will be punished are mentioned "Qazis and mallas" (Ibid.) representing the religious authorities of the Sunnis who, ruling in Delhi, were the major rivals of the Ismailis. Kalinga also plays an important role in the ginanic tradition. He is not a mere allegorical figure as in the Puranic lore where he is referred to as Kali or Kali Yuga. Kalinga is portrayed as a real demon-king whose pious wife Surja: Rani has been converted to the "truth path" (Satpanth, Nizari Ismailism). The overall tone is war-like:

Mighty armies will be struck with terror Shields and spears and drums will be there and spear after spear will strike there. The blind and the foolish, having no awareness, will oppose the lord of Khurassan, but the head of Kalinga will fall... (Shackle and More: 117).

The episode of Nikalank Avatar's marriage also forms an essential part of the ginanic prophetic tradition. One of the ginans is referred to by Nanjiani (1918: 163) as Shah no vivah (the Lord's wedding). Here the marriage of the Imam qaim acquires a highly symbolical nature. It is a cosmic wedding where the divine manifestation is the bridegroom and the bride is none but the Virgin Earth herself, that is to say the Ismaili community ideally extended to the whole world. This event, however, should not be perceived only as a religious esoterical one, but concomitantly as a socio-political programme corresponding to the ambitions of the Ismaili dawa. The revelation of the final truth is made to coincide with the advent of a new Era. In contrast the wedding scenes of the Kalki Purana, albeit more lengthy and more realistic by nature, lack these powerful symbolic and prophetic qualities.

In some prophetic ginans a detailed and vivid description of the evils of Kali Yuga, of various abnormalities, climatic disasters and cataclysms plays a crucial role, which is not the case in the Kalki and even in the Bhagavat Purana, although in the latter a few similar details are found. Actually, this motif may have deeper roots outside the ancient Hindu tradition. As Marquet has shown (1973), in the early Ismaili philosophy of the Ikhwan al-Safa or "Brothers of Purity" astrology already played a major role in the determination of future events (Ibid.: 129-146). The occurrence of certain astrological conjunctions was, for example, believed to trigger the final cataclysms which took place at the end of each cycle of time. Before reverting to the ginans it might be of interest to quote a fragment of a much earlier text, the Jamia, one of the epistles of the "Brothers of Purity" representing one of the pre-Nizari Ismaili tradition. This text describes the calamities and disorders which will then take place: lack of minerals and precious stones, destruction of cities, absence of rainfall, deluge of water or of fire. ...the air will become so hot that it will burn men and animals, science will disappear, wise men will die, prophets will be exterminated, unworthy persons will enjoy a high position, contraries will appear, etc. (Ibid.: 398-9).

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Incidentally, in the Agam vani tradition of the Nizarpanthis, Sahadev, identified with the Ismaili Pir Sadruddin who has signed a few ginans with this Hindu name (Gohil, 1994: 107), is the presumed author of a few messianic poems and is also considered to have been a famous astrologer. While both prophetic ginans and Agam vanis appear to be linked with astrological predictions, this is not the case of the Puranic tradition dealing with Kalki.

Let us now turn to the catastrophes and anomalies of the Kali Yuga as they are described in Pir Sadruddin's and Pir Shams' ginans: the faithful will slander each other and consume tobacco and wine;[14] they will not participate any longer in the sacred gatherings (jama' at) and they will worship idols (one of the major prohibitions of the otherwise tolerant and flexible Nizari religion); women will lose their honour, rulers will be like demons, caste distinctions will no more be observed (a trait also found in the Kalki Purana), etc. Besides, a variety of natural disasters are mentioned, such as the earth becoming red like copper, the sun burning like fire, the waters of lakes and rivers receding, stones and hills being burnt. In contradistinction to Sadruddin's hymns, the ginans of Pir Shams are still more replete with these eschatological elements, whilst the true messianic accents are virtually absent: darkness will cover the earth, violent winds will blow, there will be a deluge and nothing will grow on the earth; mothers will quarrel with their daughters, friends will become enemies, servants will oppress their masters, brothers will kill each other, Brahmans will exterminate the cows and Hindus and Muslims will eat together....

All these texts have a central motif: God taking account of each and every human deed. There is a general tone of warning and it is said that the faithful (Rikhisars, Momins) should not forget to perform their duties, among which the major ones were attending the regular assemblies (jama' at) and paying the obligatory tithe (dasondh). Again, this type of warning and moral advice seem to be absent from the Kalki Purana and the Bhagavata Purana. Various formulae found in these ginans, such as "take heed, take heed, O brother!" and "O faithful brothers, remember to worship your Shah" could illustrate this point. One could conclude this brief description of the prophetic ginans by stating that in the eschatological and messianic texts transmitted by the Indian Nizaris inspiration has been drawn both from the Hindu Epic and Puranic lore and from the Ismaili heritage, but that it is ultimately the Ismaili philosophy that gives to the theme its main tone and direction, determining its meaning and significance in the religious life of the devotee.

[<< Previous](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [Next >>](#)

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THE AGAM VANIS

In this light we will now analyze the Agam vanis associated with the Nizar Panth, the Bisnoi and Jasnathi movements. At present, as has been said earlier, these are perceived as separate Hindu sectarian traditions. Despite a number of variations in length, style or contents, all these songs share the same basic features and display the same central themes and motifs.

The main character is once more the tenth avatar of Vishnu who is not referred to as Kalki but as Nikalank Avatar. He will come from the West, namely from Alamul (Almot) in Daylamdesh. Allusion is thus made to the famous fortress of the so-called "Assassins", situated in the Daylami region of Iran, which has been the first center of the Nizari authority: age will come from the city of Almot, the name of the country is Delam" (Gohil, 1994: 57). These verses are found, among others, in a composition entitled Daylami aradh (Prayer of Daylam) of which a great number of versions exist, mainly ascribed to a saint called Devayat Pandit or Devayat Pir. It is also said that at the end of Kali Yuga, the Lord (Alam, one of the Muslim names of God) will assume the name of Nikalank and will also be known as Kayam (or Kayam Raja) and Mahdi (Mehdi, Mehndi): "the Kayam will kill Kalinga and take the name of Nikalank".^[15] He is described as riding a white horse and bearing a sword. As far as the Nizarpanthi tradition is concerned, in one of the twenty-four songs ascribed to Ramdev and referred to as *Chaubis praman*, one reads: "Shyam (a name of God as Krishna) will ride a white horse. He will be incarnated as the Nikalank king ..." (Bishnoi, 1989: 237). In one of the Agam vanis belonging to the Bisnoi sect, the Lord's mount is called Duldul which is the name of the famous horse of the Prophet and of Ali. Various other prophetic songs are ascribed to different saints of the Nizarpanth, but Sahadev, identified with Pir Sadruddin in the Gujarati tradition, is believed to be the main author, along with Devayat, owing to his reputation as an astrologer, a reason why he is often referred to as "Sahadev Joshi" (Sahadev the astrologer) (Gohil, 1994: 52).

Common to all these eschatological texts is the killing of the demon personifying the Kali Yuga. Referred to as Kalinga, he is also portrayed as a demon-king whose wife is the virtuous queen Surja Rani (Gohil, Ibid.: 54), the latter detail being found in a text entitled Nikalank Puran, belonging to the Jasnathi tradition. The army led by Nikalank will comprise Puranic heroes and gods (the Pandavas, Draupadi, Hariscandra, Prahlad, Brahma, Sesnag, Hanuman, etc.), as well as figures known by Muslim names: Isuf, Alladin, Dal Khoja and Makkardin, Fatima (Gohil, Ibid.: 64). One of these names, at least, can be understood as referring to a Khoja, that is to say a member of the Nizari community converted by Pir Sadruddin, while Fatima is of course Muhammad's daughter-in-law and Ali's wife, one of the five Panj tan or "sacred bodies" of Shia Islam, who gave her name to the Ismaili Fatimid dynasty. Interestingly enough, Gohil (Ibid.: 53) writes that such names as Isuf, Alladdin, Makkano

mumano (litt. The believer from Mecca), Naklankl ghoru (Nikalank's horse), Delamdes (The country of Daylam) and such other words are closely connected with the secret tradition of the Nizarpanthis and cannot be understood by the non-initiate nor revealed to them.

The marriage of Nikalank Avatar constitutes one of the main motifs of all the Agam Vanis I have studied. In the texts which belong to the Nizarpanthi community in which, let us recall, untouchables play a prominent role, the name of the bride is invariably given as Megri (or Megri Rani). The comments made by some informants, who were priests and worshippers of Ramdev, as well as the explanations given by Gohil (Ibid.: 69-73) suggest the following interpretation: Megri symbolises the Megh or Meghval community -one of the major groups of untouchables - and, as such, all the oppressed people who will triumph and be redeemed at the end of the Kali Yuga. They are also referred to as the faithful "Rishis" -a name by which the Ismaili Nizari believers of the Subcontinent were also designated. Instead, in the Bisnoi Agam Vanil mentioned earlier the bride is referred to as Vasudha Kunvari (the Virgin Earth), a mere variant of the Visva Kunvari who plays the same role in Sadruddin's ginans. Another important detail is the date of the cosmic wedding: it will take place on Thursday night, on the second day of the bright half of the month of Asvin (September-October) which follows the New Moon, and referred to as Asoj Bij. Incidentally this is exactly the same date which is mentioned for the marriage in one of Sadruddin's ginans: "on the second day (of the bright half), on Thursday night, the Lord has come to marry" (Nanjiani, Ibid.: 164). This date happens to be the most auspicious one in the Khoja as well as in the Nizarpanthi traditions, while it may be of interest to mention the importance of the New Moon for the Bisnoi (D.S. Khan, 1997).

The Agam vanis entitled Daylami aradh, generally ascribed to Devayat and later imitated by recent followers of the Nizar Panth such as Jivannath (Gohil, Ibid.: 103) describe at length the various catastrophes and anomalies which characterize the end of Kali Yuga. For example the sun will be burning with excessive heat (a motif already noted in the Ismaili prophetic songs), the Pipal tree (ficus religiosa) and the nagar bel (a variety of creeper) will bear flowers, the koil (the Indian cuckoo) which is black will become white, while the bagula (the white heron) will turn black, cobras will no longer be poisonous, nine-year old girls will give birth to children (this detail being found also in the Bhagavata Purana), cows will have two calves at a time, only elephant and camel milk will be available, etc. God will write the accounts of all human deeds and punish the sinful. A wide variety of punishments is described in some Agam vanis, as they are in a few prophetic ginans (personal communication by Z. Moir). Afterwards justice will be restored and Hindu-Muslim unity will be established. The verse "Hindu and Turks will drink from the same cup", recalling a passage of a ginan ascribed to Shams "Hindus and Muslims will even eat together", has here undoubtedly a positive meaning, whereas it seems to be written in a critical tone in the Khoja tradition, being listed among other "abnormalities". The Agam vani motif is actually an allusion to the fact that both communities will take initiation into the same panth. [16] It is also clear that the eschatological vision presented in these texts is intended as a warning to the faithful of the Nizar Panth referred to as sugras, against the non-initiated or nugas, if one bears in mind such injunctions as: "Come, O faithful men and women, partake of the holy nectar (the consecrated water referred to as paval) ;." (Gohil: 102). Finally, it is said that the end of Kali

Yuga and the advent of Nikalank Avatar will coincide with the revelation of the fifth secret Veda.
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[<< Previous](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [Next >>](#)

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TWO DISTINCT VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

Although a more detailed investigation would certainly highlight other interesting features,^[17] the sketchy analysis presented here with its emphasis on a number of themes and terms might suffice at least to show that both the Ismaili prophetic ginans and the sectarian Agam Vanis present striking similarities, whereas they differ notably from the Epic/Puranic texts devoted to the same theme. As I have attempted to show, it is the general tone and atmosphere, as well as a number of details which help us to make this deduction. A brief survey of these key elements will lead us to formulate the final hypothesis. First of all, attention should be drawn to the terminologies used in these prophetic texts: the central figure of the ginans and of the Agam Vanis is the tenth avatar referred to as Nikalank, Kayam (Qaim), Mahdi and sometimes Shah Nizar, riding a white horse called Duldul. In both cases he is identified with Ali and with the Imam as his everliving manifestation, rather than with the Hindu Kalki with whom he is, however, compared. He comes from the West, more precisely from Alamut, in the Daylami region of Iran, which was the first center of the Nizari branch of Ismailism, instead of being born in Aryavarta as in the Epic/Puranic literature. In both traditions the symbol of the cosmic wedding is central and the bride is identified with the Virgin Earth (Visva Kunvari, Vasudha Kunvari) representing the community of the faithful also symbolized by Meghri.^[18] This sacred marriage which is to take place on the auspicious date of Asoj Bij is given a strong esoteric meaning: it is at that time that the final revelation of the mystical truth symbolized by the fifth Veda is to be made. As is well known, in Hindu tradition many sacred post-vedic texts were given the name of fifth Veda (for instance the Mahabharata), the only Veda which could be read or heard by all castes, including women, and the one which was meant for the corrupted Age of Kali Yuga. The Nizari preachers obviously drew from this concept but gave it a new meaning: the Nizari "fifth Veda" was referred to as Athar Ved, the eternal "immovable" Veda succeeding the fourth one, the Atharva Veda, and its represented the final esoteric revelation of the Satpanth (Ahmad, 1969: 25; Shackle and Moir: 113; Lakhani, 1973: 89). In the Nizarpanthi Agam Vanis the fifth Veda revealed with the advent of Nikalank at the end of the Kali Yuga is also called Athar or Atharva Ved. The description of the army led by the Messiah Nikalank is another crucial point. Not only does it include both Hindu and Muslim figures (contrary of course to the Hindu/Brahmanical army of Kalki which fights the Buddhist and Jain heretics), but reference is also made to one of those "Hindu Ismailized patterns" which reflect traces of the Ismaili influence. Both in the Agams and in the ginans one finds the sequence of five, seven, nine and twelve crores (forming a total of thirty-three crores) of souls to be saved during the four Yugas (Nanjiani: 164; Gohil, 1994: 27). The main enemy is known as Kalinga and not Kali or Kali Yuga (albeit both represent the last of the four Yugas), and his wife is said to be Surja Rani, a figure who is absent from the

Epic/Puranic tradition. The faithful who will be saved - if they perform their duties - are members of a secret tradition and are referred to as Rishis (Rikhs, Rikhisars) and Momins, both terms being found in the Agam and ginanic literatures, whereas the word Rishi (rsi) has a thoroughly different meaning in the Epic/Puranic tradition where it refers to those ancient seers who had the revelation of the four Vedas. The faithful Rishis-Momins who have been properly initiated are called sugras in opposition to the ignorant nugras - a terminology that characterizes the Indian Nizari literature as well as the Medieval sectarian traditions studied here, whereas elsewhere they are generally used to distinguish "those who have a guru" and have thus obtained some kind of religious instruction in contradistinction to those who lack a guru and are full of vices. Among the duties to be performed by the faithful to avoid the terrible punishments described in the prophetic texts the central role is played by the partaking of consecrated water referred to as paval (Ivanow, 1948: 66; Shrimali, 1993: 243), variants of which are payal (Nizarpanthi Rajasthani tradition) and pahal (Bisnoi tradition), as well as the payment of the tithe known as dasondh (dasbandh). The importance of this religious tax established by the Nizari authorities in the Subcontinent (Shackle and Moir: 26) is also attested in the Bisnoi literary heritage, namely in a prophetic sabad (vani) ascribed to Jambha, the founder of the sect: the guru predicts that at the end of Kali Yuga people will be so corrupted that even the faithful will forget to pay the dasvand (Gyanprakash, 1992: 253). paval and dasondh, which were the two pillars of the Nizari dawa in the Subcontinent, can thus be said to be significant traces of the Ismaili presence. [19]

The parallelism of these terminologies which differ from the Epic/Puranic ones may appear convincing enough. However, it could be of some interest to discuss the issue on a broader level which would reveal more general, conceptual similarities. Although the Hindu notion of Yugas is introduced in both the ginanic and Agam vani traditions studied here, the dominant ideas (as also confirmed by my field inquiries) is of an astrological determination of events. We have seen that Sahadev identified with Sadraddin, is said to be a "Joshi" (astrologer) and this is why he is the author of many Agam vanis, while astrology has also played a prominent part in the early Ismaili philosophy of the Ikhwan al-Safa and continued to do so during its later phases of evolution. The emphasis on natural cataclysms and on all sorts of abnormalities, as well as on moral warning, strengthen the idea otherwise independently conveyed of a kind of revolution (an idea expressed in many other war-like ginans) which will result in an overthrow of power. The political rival is alluded to, if not directly mentioned, which is in keeping with the secretive character of the Nizari teaching, whenever one finds the motif of the conquest of Delhi, capital of the Sunni rulers from pre-moghol times onwards. In the Agam vani literature the triumph of the new revelation of the fifth secret Veda is also characteristically associated with the cosmic wedding: "The marriage altar will be at Chittor (former capital of the powerful Rajput kingdom of Mewar) and the campment of the bridegroom in Delhi" (Gohil, 1994: 97). The Lord of Alamut (the Imam) wedding the Virgin Earth becomes thus a picturesque symbol of the victory of the "true path" (Satpanth) which is spiritual as well as political in nature - an association which is characteristic of Islam in general and of Ismailism in particular. The expectation of a revolution which will lead to the overthrow of the then existing political/religious Sunni rule is drastically different from the victory described in the Epic/Puranic tradition, which is that of the established Brahmanical order over the heretics, Buddhists, and Jains, and perhaps over all

kinds of foreign powers (mlecchas). Therefore the Epic/Puranic messianic heritage is mainly exoteric and conservative by nature, whereas the ginanic/Agamic literature studied here has a definitely esoteric and revolutionary background.

[<< Previous](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [Next >>](#)

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MESSIANISM AND THE SIKHS

Let us raise a last question: apparently neither the Epic/Puranic theme related to Kalki nor the ginanic/Agam Vani prophetic heritage actually led to historical upheavals. The reason why the Hindi figure of the tenth avatar of Vishnu did not inspire local "rebellious prophets" has already been discussed. The ideal mirrored in the Kalki Purana, for example, is the total triumph of the established Brahmanical dharma over oppositional threatening forces represented by the heretical sects, whereas rebellions aim at overthrowing the existing order. In this respect the Islamic heritage is certainly different: in the course of history millennial "extremist" movements have directly resorted to the Mahdi-Qaim concept. This has occurred in Sunni as well as in Shia Islam, albeit the phenomenon is much more in conformity with the latter form of Islam, whenever a religious leader or his followers have declared that he was the expected messiah. The Mahdawi movement of Jaunpur is a well-known example in the sixteenth century context of Eastern India, where "the Mahdawi sect was an outgrowth of the widespread belief that near the turn of the millennium the Mahdi would come" (Hollister, 1978: 119-20). The phenomenon has played a central role in Ismaili history: from the Fatimid Caliph proclaimed to be the Mahdi to the grand Master of Alamut announcing that he was the Qaim of the Resurrection (qiyamat).[\[20\]](#)

However, as far as we know, neither the Khojas and Shams is, representing the main stream of Nizari Ismailism in the Subcontinent, nor the Imamshahi sect, its Gujarati "dissident" offshoot, nor the Gujarati- Rajasthani reHinduized movements on which this study is centered, have been prompted by their eschatological and messianic creeds to develop into movements of a more political, war-like nature. In their texts (both the ginans and the Agam Vanis) the final revolution, which is predicted as a kind of natural phenomenon to be foreseen by astrologers, is to come only at the end of the Kali Yuga. This belief, checking the frustrations of various oppressed -but not necessarily untouchable - social groups, seems to have favoured a passive, peaceful expectation of the final messiah of the Great Resurrection (qiyamat al-qiyama), Nikalank Avatar.

Instead, whenever real messianic rebellions have occurred in India the messiah was not identified with the tenth avatar of Vishnu. However, two cases noted by Fuchs appear to represent exceptions which deserve mentioning at this point (Fuchs, 1992: 152, 183-4).

Around 1824, during a period of uprest when the British were making attempts at pacifying the country, a Sikh sadhu claimed to be Kalki himself, "the last of the Hindu Avatars", for the purpose of overturning the reign of foreigners (Wilson, 1858: 114-5). The messiah was however apprehended and, the efforts of the Akalis supporting him being in vain, the agitation subsided "as there was no further sign of the promised Avatar". The second case reported among

others by the newspaper Blitz (1973-1974) is quite recent and still more interesting for us. The Sadhu who claimed to be the messiah was another Sikh named Baghel Singh. He was at the head of a movement referred to as Lal Kurti (lit. "red shirt") and in 1959 he declared himself to be Niskalank Avatar. As we have seen this appellation is not usual in the Hindu tradition for the tenth incarnation of Vishnu, whereas it bears unmistakable imprint of the Nizari "innovative synthesis" of the Subcontinent.

In the former case one could see a reference to the Epic/Puranic Kalki whose task is to fight heretics and mlecchas (barbarians, foreigners) and one might consider that we have merely to do with a nationalist movement directed towards the British power. This would be however an intriguing exception since no nationalist or freedom thinker ever resorted to the Kalki model in this way. On the other hand, if Kalki is to be understood as Nikalank (Niskalank) Avatar, it could be interpreted as a concept drawn from the Nizari sect. But how could one explain that Sikh sadhus resorted to an Ismaili concept, knowing that the tradition spread in the Subcontinent had always been secretive by nature? One must bear in mind the fact that both rebellions represented "margins" of Sikhism rather than its present normative form based on the Tat Khalsa episteme. As such, these events might reveal hitherto unexplored aspects of the Sikh tradition which, as Oberoi (1994) has demonstrated cannot historically be viewed as a monolith.

In his study of the Agam vanis Gohil (Ibid.: 38) alludes to the prophecies of Guru Gobind Singh and to his mention of Kalki in the Dasven Padsah ka Granth. In my book on the lost branches of the Ismailis in Rajasthan (D.S. Khan, 1997) I have raised the following question: how can one account for the numerous similarities which can be observed between certain concepts and terms found in Sikhism and Ismailism? From the ritual called pahul (pava/) to the tithe referred to as dasbandh (dasondh), from the reference to sachā badshah and dasva padshah (both names of the Ismaili Imam, the latter as compared to Vishnu's tenth incarnation) to the sacred nature of the double-edged sword used by Gobind Singh for the new form of baptism (khande ki pahu/) which, according to an oral tradition, was none other than Zul Fiqar, Imam Ali's double-edged sword, many details could be quoted to support the view that Ismailism has had an influence on the Sikh religion through the ages. If such a link could be contemplated and explored - however challenging it may appear at first sight - it would be possible to get a better understanding of the issue studied here and give it a broader dimension. The concept of Nikalank Avatar as a messiah and restorer of justice could be regarded as one of the innumerable "traces" left by the Indian Nizari ideology and philosophy on other religious movements which at present do not admit openly any link with it but may have had some historical connection which still remains to be explored. Let us hope that this modest contribution to the fascinating theme of eschatology and messianism will prompt competent scholars to start fresh investigations and search for new connections.

[<< Previous](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [Next >>](#)

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[<< Previous](#) | [Table of Contents](#)